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COMMUNIST INFLUENCE IN VENEZUELA

Summary

President Betancourt opposed the inclusion of Communists in both of his administrations, and the democratic parties supporting him made conscious and effective efforts to isolate the Communists and circumscribe their strength even prior to the 1958 elections. The principal penetration by PCV members and their sympathizers came about through electoral victories rather than appointments. Communist penetration in government was more the responsibility of the Perez Jimenez dictatorship, which tended to tolerate a limited amount of Communist activity, and especially of the succeeding provisional government of Larrazabal, which was complacent toward the Communist threat.

1. At the time of Romulo Betancourt's election in 1958, the Communists, although strong, did not constitute a serious threat to the government, largely because their influence was significantly circumscribed by conscious efforts of the democratic political parties. The Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) had, nevertheless, emerged from the Perez Jimenez dictatorship with its structure largely intact and with substantial infiltration of the mass media, the educational system, some labor organizations and youth groups, and the left sector of the Democratic Republican Union (URD) party. Marxist dogma had also come to dominate the ideology of youth and students in the URD and Democratic Action (AD) parties. In addition, the PCV had gained a large measure of popularity as a result of its participation in the Junta Patriotica, the clandestine organization formed in August 1957 whose purpose was to overthrow the Perez Jimenez dictatorship. With the fall of the dictatorship in January 1958, the PCV gained legal status and resumed overt political activity.

2. The new provisional government which replaced the ousted Perez Jimenez regime, governed from January 1958 until February 1959. During this time the PCV closed ranks with the other parties to "defend the revolution" in the face of rightist threats. As the December 1958 elections approached, however, the PCV was excluded from the negotiations of the AD, URD and Social Christian (COPEI) parties regarding election candidates and the future government coalition. It

was left with little alternative but to back one of the three candidates of the other parties. The UED's Larrazabal was the only candidate to accept the support of the PCV, thus temporarily preserving it from further political isolation.

3. The AD and the coalition parties already possessed adequate strength in government, and in the rural and labor sectors. Therefore, the PCV had very little to offer the coalition. The PCV was consequently excluded from the government coalition at the insistence of the anti-Communist elements in the three major parties. Frustrated by its efforts to improve its political position by legal overt means, the PCV began to evolve as part of its policy the use of violent opposition to the government.

4. Moreover, it is unlikely that Romulo Betancourt appointed active and clearly identified Venezuelan Communist Party members to positions in the executive branch of government either during his provisional term in office (1945-48) or during his constitutional administration (1959-64). During much of this long period of Venezuelan history, the dividing lines between Communists, Communist sympathizers, and advocates of Marxist solutions for Venezuelan domestic problems have been blurred. Betancourt's AD party, which expelled an extremist pro-Castro faction as late as 1960, has in the past had a strong Marxist flavor in its domestic programs and many of its members are, or have been, avowed proponents of certain Marxist concepts. On the other hand, Betancourt, who has become increasingly moderate in his political views with age, is a former Communist who turned strongly anti-Communist. As a defector, he distrusted and was distrusted by Communists.

5. As constitutional president, Betancourt himself opposed the appointment of Communists to government positions. In addition, the agreement among the three parties of his coalition (AD, UED, and COPEI) signed in October 1958, specifically excluded the Communists from such appointments.

6. Communist strength in government during the Betancourt administration was derived primarily from elective positions and from sympathizers of UED. The PCV won seven seats in the lower house of Congress and two in the upper house in the elections of late 1958. In addition, it gained elective seats on the key Caracas municipal council, some other municipal councils in the states, and a few scattered seats in local legislatures. Several members of the UED party, a part of the government coalition, were Communist sympathizers and/or Castroite sympathizers and also held appointive and elective positions.

7. The Communists also had an unknown number of sympathizers and opportunist collaborators in the officer ranks of the armed forces during the Betancourt regime, most of whom were in the marine corps organized by Provisional President Larrasabal in 1958. Many of these were identified and eliminated after the revolts at Carupano and Puerto Cabello in the spring of 1962. Larrasabal and his brother, an admiral on active duty, appear largely responsible for allowing this infiltration, rather than President Betancourt.

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